

Unifor's policy proposals for Ontario's COVID-19 strategy

March 24, 2020

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis without precedent and requires quick, bold and decisive action from all levels of government. Unifor has been urging the Ontario government to ensure that adequate resources are available to protect the health and safety of Ontarians, but to also help workers as they brace for this massive economic disruption.

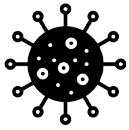
Despite postponing the planned release of its Budget, the Ontario government will issue an Economic Update on March 25. Unifor strongly urges the government to use this opportunity to implement a number of measures to protect the health and economic security of people across the province.

While the government has introduced some helpful measures – including basic job protections for workers in isolation or quarantine due to COVID-19, or those who need to be away from work to care for children because of school or day care closures; removing the requirement for medical notes if workers are on leave due to COVID-19; a freeze on evictions; opening up 50,000 child care spaces for essential workers – there is more that still needs to be done. The recommendations below reflect some of Unifor's calls to action during this crisis.

1. DIRECT INCOME SUPPORT TO ONTARIANS

The government should ensure direct income support is provided to workers impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. This should include:

- **Instituting a minimum of 14 days of paid sick leave whether a worker has been formally quarantined by a health official, or been asked to self-isolate.**
- **Establishing direct, emergency income assistance measures to all workers and families** – including those ineligible for Employment Insurance benefits (including seniors, students, recipients of social assistance, as well as gig economy, contract, and precarious workers). With the government order that all non-essential stores and services are to remain closed, many workers who do not have the option of working from home are left without an income during this pandemic.



2. ADDITIONAL HOUSEHOLD SUPPORTS

Ontarians are under severe financial pressure as a result of layoffs, reduced incomes and family commitments as a result of this crisis. Additional household supports should include:

- **Ensuring that nobody is evicted for any reason or punished in any way for missing a rent payment.** The economic disruption caused by the pandemic has made it very difficult for many people to keep a roof over their heads. In the Greater Toronto Area, the average one-bedroom condominium goes for \$2,300 per month – meanwhile, Employment Insurance payments for laid off workers are 55% of average insurable earnings (maximum \$573/week) and the new federal income measures for people who don't qualify for EI are paid at \$900 bi-weekly.
- **Ordering utilities to provide interest-free bill deferrals.** Ontarians should be able to live in dignity during this crisis without the stress of having to pay their utility bills.

3. RESTORING HEALTH CARE FUNDING

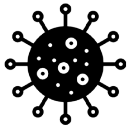
Since coming to power, the Ontario government has cut millions of funding to health care, in addition to the large-scale restructuring of the health care system. This pandemic has already illustrated some of the devastating impacts of these cuts. Our health care system needs immediate support and investment:

- **Restore funding for public health.** Last year, the government cut funding to the municipalities for public health services, requiring municipalities to now cover 30% of the costs to maintain programs. Funding for Public Health Ontario (PHO) was also cut by \$13 million and then subsequently restored for one year. However, the agency – which hosts the province's public health laboratory that tests for infectious diseases – has had funding levels frozen for years. Meanwhile, the agency has struggled with testing capacity during this crisis, leading to days-long delays in test turnaround.
- **Immediately enhance hospital funding for the coming year by a minimum of \$1 billion.** The increased funding is required to reverse previous hospital cuts, increase the number of hospital beds and increase the capacity of the system to deal with increased service volumes and inflationary costs.

4. PROTECTING SENIORS AND CARE WORKERS

Seniors have been especially vulnerable during this pandemic. The first fatalities in Canada came from a long-term care home in British Columbia, where an outbreak was declared following the infection of numerous residents and staff. This pandemic has demonstrated how seniors are being left behind and the workers who provide direct care are not properly supported.

- **Funding to enhance supports for screenings at all centres that provide care services to seniors** – including retirement homes, supportive housing and assisting living for public health.
- **Funding for long-term care in order to establish a minimum standard of daily care and address the Personal Support Worker (PSW) shortage across the province.** There is currently a crisis of care in Ontario's long-term care homes – which includes both a shortage of beds, but also a



shortage of PSWs. The increased funding is required to establish a standard of 4 hours of care per resident each day (which would increase staffing levels) while also ensuring that the system can recruit and retain PSWs (through better compensation and job security).

5. PROTECTING JOBS

The economic disruption caused by this pandemic has created serious uncertainty for small businesses and social service agencies across the province. The government should implement measures to prevent the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs created by these employers.

- **Enhance wage subsidies.** The federal government has offered a 10 percent wage subsidy program for small businesses. However, businesses have made it clear that this amount would not be enough to save jobs. Unifor is advocating for wage subsidies and unemployment replacement rates closer to 80 percent of earnings – comparable to other nations. The province should provide a more substantial top-up so that small business can continue to employ their staff during this difficult time.
- **Automatically renew funding transfer payments to agencies and organizations in the broader public sector.** This would ensure that staff can be retained and that important services can be maintained throughout and after the current crisis.